

The Dugs of Tiresias: Female Sexuality and Modernist Nationalism in *The Waste Land* and *Les mamelles de Tirésias*

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In the wake of second wave feminist criticism, the misogyny of modernist writers such as T. S. Eliot often goes unquestioned. In the last decade, however, the tide began to turn and as scholars investigated further older assumptions about the way we look at canonical figures, these scholars often encountered resistance. In a 2007 review of a book on Eliot, Terry Eagleton asked, “Why do critics feel the need to defend [T. S. Eliot] against all charges of misogyny and antisemitism?” He further stated, “The poetry is shot through from end to end with a fear and loathing of women.” Yet this uncritical acceptance of critical dogma should itself raise eyebrows. While Eagleton’s primary purpose is to make a distinction between the personal habits of an author and the critique of his or her literary production, the blanket statement of Eliot’s misogyny, particularly in light of such a dynamic time period for gender construction, ought to be cause for re-examination. Indeed, recent scholarship on Eliot explores the contradictions and nuances in Eliot’s portrayal of modernist sexuality and representations of the feminine, revealing a far more complicated situation than previously acknowledged.

It is with this approach in mind that I suggest a careful re-examination of modernist female sexuality as represented in *The Waste Land*. When viewed within the political context of the modernist era, female sexuality is no longer only a social issue, but an economic and political issue as well, and a woman’s body becomes a possession of the state. Eliot’s use of Ovid’s Tiresias reveals a previously unexamined allusion¹ to Guillaume Apollinaire’s *Les mamelles de Tirésias* and adds layers of complexity to interpreting this figure’s narrative frame. Representations of modernist female

sexuality, such as Lil in the “Game of Chess” passage, and the typist of “The Fire Sermon,” as described by Ovid’s Tiresias and set in parallel to Apollinaire’s Tirésias / Thérèse figure, reveal a sympathetic depiction of women, demoralized and dehumanized by their economic and political roles in society.

Critical Foundations: Questioning Eliot’s Misogyny and the Politics of Female Sexuality in the Modernist Era

Eliot’s depiction of women is not, as it is often presented, uncomplicated nor is his misogyny without doubt. Eliot’s misogyny is not even worth questioning according to Eagleton: “Eliot’s well-earned reputation is established beyond all doubt.” Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s extensive work on the twentieth century woman writer found misogyny to be a fundamental characteristic of the modernist male author. Cassandra Laity refers to Eliot’s “role as a stock figure for misogyny in feminist overviews” (4). However, regardless of whether Eliot is or is not a misogynist, I believe that viewing Eliot’s treatment of women as uncomplicated results in ignoring key details in his work: “[C]ontemporary feminist readers of the male modernists must address misogyny directly, if only to move beyond it to more complicated readings of gender-inflicted aspects of their work” (McDonald 191).

In fact, recent scholarship suggests that what is often interpreted as violence or indifference to women in general can be viewed as class based and that Eliot is selectively sympathetic towards women. Gail McDonald attempts to account for Eliot’s extreme popularity and the lack of feminist criticism among educated women during his own time in her essay “Through the Schoolhouse Windows: Women, the Academy, and T. S. Eliot” and suggests, among other things, that Eliot’s portrayal of bourgeois “ladies” in his early poetry would have been equally contemptuous had it come from a female modernist: “Independent-minded women of the 1920s, however, also refer to ‘ladies’ derisively, deflating the pretensions of the guardians of gentility” (185-186). In addition to the class issues of the anti-bourgeois sentiment suggested in *The Waste Land*, discursive analysis suggests a close sympathy with the afflicted and the working class. Richard Badenhansen, in his essay “T. S. Eliot Speaks the Body: The Privileging of Female Discourse in *Murder and the Cathedral* and *The Cocktail Party*,” has suggested a more complex reading of Eliot’s

relation to the feminine by examining the power of female voice in these texts. Similarly, Jennifer Sorensen Emery-Peck examines the use of popular culture or “lower” class discursive elements to challenge the labels of both elitist and misogynist for Eliot, noting the significance of lower-class female narrative in the poem and studying the influence of both Eliot’s wife Vivien and the Eliots’ housemaid on *The Waste Land*.

Many others note that much of what appears to be anti-feminine was approved by women of the time, including Vivien Eliot and Virginia Woolf. In “Mimetic Desire and the Return to Origins in *The Waste Land*,” Jewel Spears Brooker notes that Eliot’s portrayal of the hysterical woman in *The Waste Land* is sympathetic, that Eliot’s nervous first wife obviously approved of the portrayal according to her notes in the facsimile edition, and that Eliot’s use of Ovid’s Philomel throughout “A Game of Chess” and “The Fire Sermon” sections of the poem suggest a sympathy with the feminine. Julie Elaine Goodspeed-Chadwick also notes the influence that Vivien had on the authorship of *The Waste Land* and suggests Eliot has a unique ability to sympathize and identify with women: “The change of Eliot’s citizenship and the subsequent acculturation allowed him a unique perspective [. . .] As a result, Eliot could relate to the marginalized position of women and may very well have identified with women in *The Waste Land* ” (118). The sum conclusion of all of this criticism, mostly from the last decade, is three-fold. Firstly, while second wave feminism and some modernist women found Eliot’s view of women misogynistic, often to the detriment of Vivien, Vivien herself did not disagree with the portrayal, and in fact encouraged it, as did other women in the time period. Secondly, Eliot’s view of women is complicated and far more nuanced than the label of elitist misogynist allows, and his use of different narrative and lyrical techniques is often sympathetic to the feminine, and particularly the working class. Lastly, this complexity is accounted for by seeing Eliot’s violence and even indifference as representations of the commodification of female sexuality. As Goodspeed-Chadwick states, “How can [*The Waste Land*] be anti-feminist when Eliot, like Marx, can be read as an advocate for change in the material conditions of women?” (125). Rather, one of his key portrayals of women is contained within a narrative frame aligned with the feminine, one that grants power to a feminine voice, and one that suggests a far deeper interpretation grounded in hysterization.

Michel Foucault's analysis of modern sexuality reveals a number of key underlying power structures, but two are especially relevant to analyzing Eliot and Apollinaire: the hysterization of women's bodies, causing female sexuality to become an analyzed, dissected object in medical and psychological discourse, and the socialization of procreative behaviors, by which the reproduction of a couple became a part of economic and political discourse (104-105). While these two factors began with the bourgeoisie towards the end of the nineteenth century, it is during the beginning of the twentieth that they cross class levels: "For their part, the working classes managed for a long time to escape the deployment of 'sexuality'" (121). These two factors are especially present in the modernist era due to the emerging issues of birth control and the contrasting nationalistic demand for repopulation. The Malthusian couple,² who scheduled and limited their reproduction through the advent of birth control, became a social stigma after World War I and later the Spanish Flu Pandemic depleted the populations of nations. Medical discourse also began to compare the nervousness experienced by shell-shock victims to the symptoms of hysteria, complicating the gendered identity of the soldier as well as that of the hysterical woman (Gish 111). The emergence of modernist feminism combined with the advent of wartime women entering both academia and the workforce created new political ramifications as to the ownership and purpose of a woman's body.

Eliot's Tiresias: A Narrative Frame of Comparison

Within this complicated social and political context, modernists like Eliot and Apollinaire examine the sexualized female body as an object of economic and political significance. Characteristics of Eliot's women, frequently taken as misogynistic, can also be perceived as examinations of this shifting role of women in the workforce, particularly when compared to Apollinaire's characterization of feminism. While Eliot's bourgeoisie women are portrayed as anxious and helpless in *The Waste Land*, working class women are especially mechanical and dehumanized. However, the narrative voice of Ovid's Tiresias serves to make the reader empathize with and relate to the feminine rather than perceive it as a political object. Tiresias's presence also creates a contrast between a classical portrayal of passion and sexual pleasure and the soullessness of one woman

reproducing at the risk of her life for God and country and another mechanically and apathetically going through the motions. The comparison with Apollinaire, also achieved by way of the narrative frame of Tiresias, further complicates the issue of the nationalistic female body by expressing the anxieties felt by men and referencing a surrealistic world where men can overcome the inconvenience of female sexuality. The complex signification of the female body and the allusion to Apollinaire are impossible without the use of Tiresias as a narrative frame, and indeed, without the invocation of Ovid's Tiresias specifically.

While Tiresias has a long classical history in literature and many symbolic representations associated with him, Eliot is very specific about the characteristics he is emphasizing. He makes a passing reference to Sophocles' blind prophet of the Oedipus Trilogy in one line and a half-line allusion to the wise man of the Underworld in Homer's *Odyssey*, but Eliot clearly states in his verbose footnote for line 218 that he is referring to Ovid's portrayal in the *Metamorphoses*. While this is not the first allusion to the *Metamorphoses*, the footnote is considerably longer than any other. The earlier reference to Philomel, for instance, merely warrants a line number. Eliot's reference to Tiresias, however, warrants a lengthy expository paragraph and the poetic passage quoted almost in entirety. While certainly, Eliot's footnotes are not always to be trusted or taken at face value, the sheer number of lines devoted to this one section indicates an attempt to draw attention to key factors only present in the Ovidian representation and as Eliot himself said, "No poet . . . has his complete meaning alone" ("Tradition" 38).

Eliot's invocation of Ovid is itself a commentary on seduction. Ovid's persona in his didactic poetry on sexual conquest was the *praeceptor amoris*, a teacher of seduction. His texts *Amores* (The Loves), *Ars Amatoria* (Art of Love) and *Remedia Amoris* (Cure for Love) were all concerned with winning over a sexual partner or keeping interest in the affair. Ovid also wrote *The Heroides*, a work that retells epics of antiquity from the female point of view, giving voice to Aeneas' Dido, Jason's Medea, and Odysseus's Penelope, suggesting that women previously considered plot points and accessories to their respective stories not only had their own perspectives but were frequently wronged by the supposed heroes. The *Metamorphoses*, Ovid's best-known work, is centered on the theme of transformation and is filled with stories of gods changing

forms to seduce or rape young maidens, begetting demigods along the way. In fact, the passage Eliot refers to follows one such story, that of Jove's ravishing of Semele, and the passionate, violent, and ultimately fatal jealousy of Juno. For Ovid, Tiresias and Semele are connected by the fiery passion and sexuality of Juno.

In contrast to the idea of classical fires, Eliot sets his own couple, the typist and the clerk and their tepid, mechanical affair. The "young man carbuncular," like Jove, plans his "assault" carefully (*CP* 44). However, where Jove may have watched the habits or actions of a maiden and altered his form to suit her, the young man waits until his prey is full from dinner after a long day at work and "she is bored and tired" (*CP* 44). Where Jove might engage in a courtship ritual, the clerk "Endeavours to engage her in caresses / Which still are unproved, if undesired" (*CP* 44). Eliot has put this scene in stark contrast to the strategic courtship rituals or even "ravishing" scenes of the classical era. While Gilbert and Gubar refer to the passage as a "figurative rape" (2:340), some, such as Goodspeed-Chadwick, have viewed the scene between the typist and the clerk as a more literal rape scene, particularly in light of Philomel's role within the poem (120-121). Philomel, as famously told by Ovid, was kidnapped and raped by her brother-in-law and had her tongue cut out to prevent her from telling anyone. Philomel and her sister Procne vengefully feed Tereus his own children, and after their deaths they transform into birds, usually a nightingale and / or sparrow, depending on the version of the tale. Spears Brooker notes a "moral pollution" in the "vignette" between the typist and the clerk: "The central event in this poem of crisis is rape, and as both violence and desire are contagious, the effects of Philomel's violation have spread from the center to the periphery in all directions. . . . In Ovid's version of Philomel, the emphasis is primarily on the link between violence and desire" (144-145). Perceived in this light, the clear apathy of the typist and the callousness of the clerk are a stark contrast to the violence and desire of the Ovidian predecessors. Gilbert and Gubar suggest this contributes to the "upside-down world" of gender change and that the scene is a "parody of the male dominance-female submission that should be associated with fertility and order" because of the young man's social position and the fact the woman is "not really submissive but simply indifferent" (339). However, the classical scene this is connected to by allusion is one of godly passion and sexual pleasure, rather than a dominant / submissive paradigm. This is all the more

explicit when viewed through the eyes of Tiresias.

The vignette of the typist and the clerk is relayed by Tiresias, an “old man with wrinkled female breasts” who is “throbbing between two lives” (*CP* 43). While Tiresias is exterior to the scene, he is capable of relating to both genders in the encounter and empathizing with both individuals. However, despite the two genders, Tiresias is grounded in the feminine from the beginning by immediately focusing on the typist’s perspective. As his narrative zooms in from the outside world, the frame is centered on the typist: her exhaustion, her undergarments, her lifestyle. Like her, he “too awaited the expected guest” and has “foresuffered all / enacted on this same divan or bed” (*CP* 44).

Despite his ability to empathize with the clerk as well, Tiresias is harshly critical of the pimply, vain young man. While Tiresias relates the internal, unspoken thoughts in the brain of the typist, he remains disconnected from the emotions and thoughts of the clerk, only describing and analyzing his actions from the external perspective. The clerk’s “vanity requires no response” and he “makes a welcome of indifference” and receives it in abundance (44). As his “unreproved, if undesired” caresses progress towards “assault,” he encounters “no defence” (44). The typist is not welcoming the “passionate” encounter, but she does not act to end it. Assurance is not a comfortable quality of the young man, rather it is like an expensive accessory on the nouveau riche, which implies his flimsy assurance and confidence in assault could be deterred; yet she does nothing to put him off. When finished, after he has “grope[d] his way” to the stairs, she isn’t traumatized or relieved, but she has hardly noticed his absence (44). Her role in the sexual conquest is one of unconsciousness and passivity: “Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: / ‘Well now that’s done and I’m glad it’s over’” (44). Lastly, Eliot’s Tiresias repeatedly emphasizes his female characteristics: the “old man with wrinkled dugs,” with his “wrinkled female breasts” ties his masculine-gendered body to the feminine genitalia and sexual experience (44, 43).

Even when inside the mind of the typist, his description of her encounter is distant and filled with wearied cynicism. In this way Eliot indicates the veneer of intimacy and suggests that the distant cold mechanics of the act is related to vocation, class, and the industrial revolution. The young man is “one of the low on whom assurance sits / As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire” (44). Not only is Tiresias

associating each sexual participant in terms of their occupation, he associates the typist with a “taxi throbbing waiting” and the young man with an industrialist. She is a machine acting out what she has been programmed to do. Tiresias foregrounds the idea of a “human engine,” even before introducing himself, making the industrial, robotic sexual encounter all the more blatant (43). Eliot would later critique the “tendency of unlimited industrialism . . . to create bodies of men and women . . . detached from tradition, alienated from religion, and susceptible to mass suggestion: in other words a mob” (*Christianity and Culture* 17). Given this context, it is more likely that Eliot’s poem is criticizing the demoralizing effects of industrialism rather than expressing misogynistic undercurrents.

The passage is even more soulless and mechanized when viewed in light of the footnote. Eliot has the reader look to the story of how the seer was blinded and how he can relate to the male and female perspectives, a tale within a tale founded in sexual pleasure: “Cum Iunone iocos et ‘maior vestra profecto est / Quam, quae contingit maribus’, dixisse, ‘voluptas.’” “[Jove] jests with Juno and said ‘Actually, it is your sex that attains more pleasure than males’³ (Ovid 318-319). “Voluptas” as defined by the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* means pleasure, especially sensory delight but also the act of sexual intercourse itself, and it is the core of the argument that causes the divine couple to seek Tiresias’s guidance. It is because of *voluptas* that Tiresias’s tale of dual sexuality is told. It is because of female sexual pleasure that he judges in favor of Jove and that the goddess Juno blinds him and, more obscurely, it is because of *voluptas* he is granted prophecy as a consolation prize. One could even suggest he is punished for revealing the depths of female sexual pleasure to the masculine other. At the center of the Ovid is pleasure; at the center of the Eliot is indifference. Tiresias, particularly in light of the footnote, serves as signification and privileging of female sexual pleasure, and his presence as the frame of the scene shows just how decayed sex has become.

It is through Tiresias’s empathy with the typist that the lack of female *voluptas* is so clear. By means of Tiresias, Eliot portrays a by-gone golden age where sex is used for the purpose of pleasure and is particularly pleasurable for women. And yet his portrayal of the typist and clerk suggests that sex is no longer for recreation, or even for procreation, but the recurring action of machinery preprogrammed and degraded. The two individuals are described not by names, as Lil

and Albert are, but solely by occupation, suggesting a link between the industrialization of society and mechanization of the sexual act. What is especially absent from this picture is that while there are production line workers, there is no production: this is not presented as sex for the purpose of producing children. The clerk is the initiator and presumably experiences something akin to pleasure, but the typist is operating as a matter of form—a voluntary sexual objectification.

This supremacy of male sexual pleasure combined with sympathy for the feminine is also seen in Lil in “A Game of Chess” of *The Waste Land*. While her story is narrated by her “friend,” who is far from sympathetic to Lil’s fate, the details presented complicate the issue. The unnamed female exhibits a catty competitive quality, and remonstrates that Lil must “think of poor Albert, / He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time, / And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will” (CP 41). Lil “ought to be ashamed” about her appearance, her friend says, because it is a wife’s place to please her husband and a husband’s place to be polygamous if necessary (42). Lil is toothless and looks “antique,” and her premature aging is dehumanizing and reminiscent of Eliot’s opening allusion to the Sibyl, whose control of her own sexuality against the will of Apollo resulted in her aging away to dust. Lil’s appearance, however, is a direct result of the sexual identity allowed to the nationalistic, industrialized woman—motherhood. “She’s had five already, and nearly died of young George,” her friend tells us matter-of-factly after Lil has explained her appearance is the fault of the drugs she took to abort her sixth child. Her friend, representing another societal norm for female sexuality, reminds Lil of her place: “Well, if Albert won’t leave you alone, there it is, I said, / What you get married for if you don’t want children?” (42). In terms of T. S. Eliot’s misogyny, it is worth noting that, according to the Facsimile edition edited by Valerie Eliot, Vivien Eliot is the one who added this line (21). The post-war political idea of repopulation, particularly after the extreme death tolls of WWI and the flu pandemic, became a foundational motivation for some sexual beliefs—women were to be baby factories and men were allowed to be polygamous due to woman’s inherent time limitations for completion. Like other capitalized ideas, sexuality became about mass production, and, if men just so happened to enjoy their work while serving their country’s population needs, so be it. This aspect of sexuality, that of polygamous male pleasure superseding female wellness and of female sexuality’s sole purpose being that of

repopulation, is presented in “A Game of Chess,” but is suggested by Tiresias’s presence in section III, “A Fire Sermon,” as well.

In addition to his role as a symbol of female sexual pleasure, and an allusion to classical grandeur to contrast the emptiness and alienation of industrialized gender roles, Tiresias stands as a representation of hermaphroditism. The significance of Tiresias possessing characteristics of both genders has been examined at length, even being suggested as a kind of anxious transvestism (Gilbert and Gubar 2:338-339). Often this simultaneous hermaphroditism is the foundation or central core of any gendered argument surrounding *The Waste Land*. However, Eliot’s footnote is as explicit as it is lengthy, and quotes the following from Ovid: “Deque viro factus, mirabile, femina septem / Egerat autumnos; . . . / . . . percussis anguibus isdem / Forma prior rediit genetivaeque venit imago.” ‘. . . extraordinary! He was made a woman from a man and spent seven autumns . . . After beating the same snakes again, the earlier form returned and his born image appeared’ (Ovid 321-329). Just as Eliot roots his Tiresias in a metaphor for female pleasure, he also points out the deviation he took in the construction of the original character. Eliot’s addition to Tiresias is significant in its allusion, just as it is significant in its representation of gender.

As previously noted, it is Tiresias’s wrinkled female breasts that enable him / her to unite the sexes and expose this degradation of the female sexual experience from its classical origin. And yet, as Eliot’s footnote referencing Ovid clearly states, Tiresias is not a man with wrinkled breasts— “forma prior rediit genetivaeque venit imago” ‘the earlier form returned and his born image appeared’ (329). Tiresias was not a simultaneous hermaphrodite, but a sequential one, first being born into one form in entirety, then changing to the other, in entirety, and then returning to his original form in entirety. Ignoring that there are other examples of simultaneous hermaphrodites in classical literature, most notably the condition’s namesake, there is no reason for Tiresias to retain characteristics of both genders, particularly when Eliot has gone to such great lengths to include the sequence in his notes, unless it is to draw focus toward the breasts of Tiresias, *Les mamelles de Tirésias* in French.